

BROTHER JIM CROW

by
JAMES RORTY

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P O S T W A R W O R L D C O U N C I L

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AMERICA'S ability to solve her own problems of racial minorities may well be a test of her ability to win this war and to lay the foundations of a lasting peace. The military and ideological importance of these problems is incalculable. As Pearl Buck says, if we do not recognize the valid claims of the colored peoples of the earth, and especially of those in our own country, we shall have lost the war, for we shall still have to face another and more terrible war, a war of color.

In this pamphlet, Mr. Rorty describes the present status of the Negro in American industry. He calls particular attention to a most significant case, that of the colored Locomotive Firemen, the record of which was, in effect, censored by War Manpower Commissioner Paul McNutt, when he abruptly "postponed" the January 25--27 hearings of the Fair Employment Practices Committee.

Mr. Rorty's interest in race relations dates from the Sacco-Vanzetti case when he was imprisoned for joining in a demonstration outside the Massachusetts State House. More recently, in the last-ditch struggle of the Workers Defense League in the case of Odell Waller, he made an important contribution to the growth of public understanding of racial issues. Formerly an advertising man, Mr. Rorty, poet and publicist, is the author of several books, notably *American Medicine Mobilizes*, and *Where Life Is Better*, a prophetic study of America in the depression years.

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January 18, 1943

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THE President's cigarette holder tilted sharply upward and his voice lost its genial fireside overtones.

"You mustn't do that," he snapped. "You can't do that."

It was a week after the passage of the Lend-Lease Act and six months before Pearl Harbor. Four Negro leaders, A. Philip Randolph, Walter White, Frank Crosswaith and Layle Lane, had come to Washington to ask for government action designed to open the employment rolls of an already booming war industry to Negro workers. Other similar delegations had gone away empty handed. But by this time the situation was fast becoming dangerous from the point of view of an administration interested primarily in aiding the allies and in furthering our own war preparations. The Negroes, north and south, were threatening to march on Washington to get relief from discrimination both in the armed forces and in industry. In the opinion of A. Philip Randolph, head of the March on Washington Committee and President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, they would make good this threat unless something was done to help them.

So Randolph, a Negro, felt obliged to talk back to the President; not bumptiously, but with simple matter-of-factness. Very well, he said in effect, since the President conceded the genuineness of the Negroes' grievances, but didn't want the March, what would he do to prevent it?

The President did something. In fact he did two things that may prove ultimately to be of almost Lincolnian fatefulness. He wrote, in Executive Order No. 8802, what amounts to a Bill of Economic Rights for Negroes. "There shall be no discrimination" it reads, "in the employment of workers in defense industries or in government because of race, creed, color or national origin"

The second thing the President did was to appoint the Fair Employment Practices Committee, empowered to investigate violations of Order No. 8802 and to "take appropriate steps to redress grievances." The Committee at this writing consists of Malcolm S. MacLean, President of Hampton Institute, Chairman; Mark Ethridge, publisher of the Louisville Courier-Journal, David Sarnoff, President of the Radio Corporation of America, Philip Murray and William Green, Presidents respectively of the CIO and the AF of L; Alderman Earl B. Dickerson of Chicago; and Milton P. Webster, vice-president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The last two are Negroes. Mr. Webster was appointed by a second executive order, No. 8003, obtained only after a renewal of pressure by Randolph and his allies.

The FEPC is both one of the most significant and one of the frailest of Mr. Roosevelt's war-time creations. It has been financed by largesse from the President's Emergency Fund. On July 30, 1942, after the successful Birmingham hearings and the resulting pressure from southern reactionaries, it was transferred to Paul McNutt's War Manpower Commission. There it remains despite stiff protests by Negro pressure groups. It has been continuously starved for funds, and has, therefore, never been able to deal with more than a fraction of the violations reported to it. Lacking independent enforcing power, it can only issue "cease

and desist" orders and turn for their enforcement to other government agencies. Nevertheless, the FEPC, aided by the tightening scarcity of war workers, has made substantial progress. Between June 25, 1941, when Order No. 8802 was signed, and January 1, 1943, Negro workers have obtained many thousands of jobs, directly or indirectly owing to the Committee's actions.

The FEPC has held six hearings in five cities. Liberal plant managers have cooperated to good effect with the Committee's representatives; so also have progressive trade union executives and business agents. The latter have long regarded race discrimination by the unions and by prejudiced white workers on the job as the weakest point in the armor of organized labor.

Backed by increasingly vigorous public support the FEPC has cracked open a good many industries hitherto closed to Negroes, notably the young, tough aircraft industry. Glenn Martin started by saying that he "didn't have time to pioneer in the difficult job of getting black workers into his plants." But by August, 1942, the Glenn Martin plant at Fort Crook, Nebraska, was employing 300 Negroes, and the Company had written its own personnel office that discrimination because of race would be considered sufficient cause for dismissal.

In Burbank, California, the FEPC broke through even stiffer opposition. There the Lockheed Vega corporation has a closed shop contract with the International Association of Machinists, which accepts no Negro members. But following an appeal to the President, the IAM issued permits to Negro workers. The Lockheed Company now employs over 500 of them.

In January, 1942, the personnel director of the A. O. Smith Company of Milwaukee told a Negro applicant "This Company has been here 40 years. It has never employed a Negro and never will." Eight months later this Company was employing 447 Negroes, including nearly a hundred on skilled or semi-skilled jobs.

One of the recalcitrant firms called by the FEPC at its Chicago hearings last January was the Heil Company of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which then had just two Negroes among its 2,140 employees. Eight months later, there were 1440 Negroes in the plant. "The colored people are taking an interest in their work," testifies the Heil Company's works manager, "and up to the present time there has been no friction in the plant because of their employment."

As a matter of fact there rarely is any friction. Dozens of personnel directors who said it couldn't be done have found themselves doing it, and the expected black-white trouble has wholly failed to materialize. Plant managers have also been obliged to acknowledge that the productivity of the Negroes is as good as, or better than that of the whites. Finally, they have discovered that the all-white unions, when challenged, have rarely been prepared to make their color bar stick in the face of a public opinion increasingly critical of anything likely to obstruct the war effort.

In July, 1941, the Moore Drydock Company of Oakland, California, employed no Negroes because of the opposition of the metal trade unions. A little over a year later the Moore Company had 2,000 Negroes on the payroll, without segregation, including Negro women employed as electricians and welders. The Company has reported no trouble. Neither has the Western Electric Company, which since

1941 has introduced 400 Negroes, mostly on skilled jobs, into its Kearny, New Jersey plant. In Baltimore, Maryland, the same Company broke all local precedents by employing many Negro women—this with no facilities for segregation in either wash rooms or eating places.

An Exploded Myth

The myth that whites and blacks cannot or will not work amicably together has long since been exploded by some of the largest and best known employers in America. Among these are the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, the National Bronze and Aluminum Company, the Bohn Aluminum Company, the Ingalls Iron Works Company, the Bethlehem Steel Corporation, the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, the Ford Motor Company, the Scullins Steel Corporation, the Pressed Steel Car Company, the Bridgeport Brass Works, Wilson Brothers, Swift and Company, and the Pittsburgh Coal Company.

Yet, despite these long-standing exceptions, plus the more recent converts, it remains true

—that discrimination against Negroes is still the prevailing pattern in American industry;

—that this pattern has caused and continues to cause serious obstruction of the war effort;

—that the FEPC, lacking funds, personnel and enforcing authority, and unable to answer employers and unions who point cheerfully to the discrimination practiced systematically by the army and navy, has been able to do little more than peck at the edges of the domain where Negroes are lucky if they get even jobs as janitors.

—that unless much more substantial progress is made on this crucial front of the democratic struggle, the Negro's Bill of Economic Rights, represented by Order No. 8802, may be abrogated almost as completely after this war as were the 14th and 15th amendments, his bill of political rights, after the Civil War. Moreover, if this happens, we shall be obliged to blame Jim Crow trade unions fully as much as Jim Crow employers.

The Color Bar and the Unions

The color bar, written into the constitutions and rituals of some of our oldest and most powerful unions is in most cases both a reflection of race prejudice and a device by which whites pre-empt jobs for themselves in a scarcity economy. Inevitably the color bar builds up forces hostile to trade unionism. Invariably it has been a club which employers have seized to break strikes, lower wages and working conditions, divide and conquer the forces of organized labor.

On January 1, 1943, there were 21 unions which excluded Negroes from membership and seven others which gave them only Jim Crow auxiliary status. Here is the list:

Unions which exclude Negroes entirely, by provisions in their rituals or in their constitutions: the National Association of Machinists; Switchmen's Union of North America; National Organization of Masters, Mates, and Pilots; Airline Pilots Association; American Wire Weavers Protective Association; Railway Mail Association; Commercial Telegraphers Union; Order of Railway Telegraphers; Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen; Order of Railway Conduc-

tors; Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen; American Federation of Railroad Workers; American Association of Train Dispatchers; Railroad Yard Masters of North America; and Railroad Yard Masters of America.

Unions which tacitly exclude Negroes: the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; United Association of Journeymen Plumbers and Steamfitters; American Flint Glass Workers Union; Asbestos Workers, Heat, and Frost Insulators; Granite Cutters International Association.

Unions which afford Negroes only segregated Jim Crow auxiliary status: the Brotherhood of Railroad Car-men of America; Brotherhood of Railroad and Steamship Clerks, Freight Handlers, Express and Station Employees; Brotherhood of Blacksmiths, Drop Forgers and Helpers; Brotherhood of Boiler Makers, Iron Ship Builders, Welders and Helpers of America; Sheet Metal Workers International Association; Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, National Federation of Rural Letter Carriers; and National Rural Letter Carriers' Association.

These are in effect the "strong points" of an invisible line, by no means coincident with the Mason and Dixon line, which still for the most part limits Negroes to second class citizenship in industry. And among the toughest fortresses of racism are the eight railroad brotherhoods.

He Who Gets Bumped

Back in March, 1942, the FEPC was persuaded by A. Philip Randolph's Provisional Committee to Organize Colored Locomotive Firemen to undertake a general survey of what was happening to Negro workers on the railroads,

which are recognized to be a war industry. Henry Epstein, formerly Solicitor General of New York State, was appointed special counsel for the Committee. Public hearings were scheduled for January 25—27 in Washington. A trio of competent investigators began weaving together the threads of a rather horrific story which might well be called "The Last Stand of the Colored Locomotive Fireman" or "He Who Gets Bumped." Then, abruptly, on January 11th, War Manpower Commissioner Paul McNutt told his press conference that the hearings would be postponed in order to give the War Manpower Commission "time to work out the situation," that if a solution could be found there would be no need for hearings. Quite possibly, the files of the FEPC on this case will not be opened until after the war. Meanwhile, here, in brief, is the essence of the story that Mr. McNutt did not consider quite fit to spread on the record.

The Negroes built the southern railroads and for many years pretty much manned them in all categories of employment up to but not including the engineers and the conductors. White Supremacy forbade that a Negro should run a train or hold a position in authority over whites. The same underlying social attitude wrote the color bar into the constitutions and rituals of the railroad Brotherhoods, and established a wage differential as between whites and blacks doing identical work. Another factor in the situation was the steadily tightening dilemma of the railroad managers in recent years. All of them have had to earn interest and dividends on inflated capital structures. Increasingly they have been forced by truck and air competition to "rationalize" their operating costs through technological advances. This in turn entailed a reduction of personnel. (On all

American roads this reduction amounted to over a million workers between 1924 and 1942.)

To meet this squeeze the white railroader has had the protection of his union. The Negro has had nothing except the chance to risk his life by scabbing on the white Brotherhood which would not admit him to membership.

In such a situation, obviously, the Negro was due to get "bumped," the process being curiously analogous to the familiar railroad operation in which a switching engine bumps the first of a string of freight cars, the shock is transmitted from car to car, and the last one rolls neatly on to a siding.

Today there are thousands of Negro ex-firemen stranded on metaphorical sidings—village odd jobs and subsistence farms—all over the south. Many of the older men are on relief. Their elimination, over a period of three decades, has been accomplished by a combination of violence and chicanery. In 1911 Negro switchmen were murdered by job-jealous white railroaders calling themselves "Zulus." At the pit of the depression Negro firemen were shot out of their cabs near Memphis and in Mississippi.

Good-Bye, Choptanooga Choo-Choo

The Negro firemen got their first big jolt during World War I. Attracted by the higher wages paid in war industries, numbers of them left their jobs and went north. To prevent the threatened demoralization of rail transportation, Secretary McAdoo intervened and equalized the pay of whites and blacks. That would have been a victory for the Negroes—if only they had enjoyed the job protection enjoyed by members of white unions. They didn't. Moreover,

the carriers, interested primarily in cheap labor, now had no further reason to defend them from the aggression of the white unions.

There followed, for the Negroes, a long agony of attrition, which was scarcely relieved by the huge literature of jurisdictional disputes between the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen. Each of these white unions was eager to "represent" the Negroes, to whom neither was prepared to extend membership. Meanwhile both Brotherhoods were busy negotiating secret agreements with the carriers, in which the Negro "brother" invariably took a beating. In fact the Negroes had about as much chance as a Jew before one of Hitler's arbitration boards. They weren't even permitted to look at or listen in on what was being done to them. Under the Railway Labor Act, amended in 1934 and 1936, the white Brotherhoods were in effect permitted to act as the sole bargaining agents for the Negroes to whom they denied union membership and whose jobs they were progressively appropriating.

This Alice in Wonderland arrangement was climaxed in February, 1941 when the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen made a seemingly innocent contract with the Southeastern Carrier's Conference, representing twenty-five southern railways. The agreement provided that the proportion of non-promotable firemen and helpers on other than steam power should not exceed 50 per cent. For all practical purposes "non-promotable" means Negroes. It should be noted that the agreement sets a maximum for Negro employment on the Diesels but no minimum. In practice, various jokers in the contract are used to exclude

Negroes entirely. Today, while Negroes are not permitted to operate the Diesel, they are frequently called upon to train the white men who will replace them. When a Negro dies, retires or is fired, no Negro replaces him. It is always a white man. In short, the intent of the present policy is clear, and its joint execution by the carriers and the white unions admits of few exceptions.

The strategic importance of saving these colored firemen's jobs can scarcely be exaggerated. If the FEPC cannot prevent the unfair and illegal elimination of Negro workers from jobs in which they have been established for nearly a century, its ability to open up new opportunities for Negroes will be seriously impaired. If it permits defiance or evasion of the President's order by the powerful rail Brotherhoods, it may eventually face a relapse into Jim Crowism, especially after the war, by other unions which have recently begun to see the light. On the other hand if the latest offensive of the Brotherhood-carrier coalition can be stopped, then the way is opened for more and more upgrading of Negro workers not merely on the railroads but throughout industry. Nothing short of this will satisfy the Negroes and in fact nothing short of this will give a socially sound and permanent solution of the problem.

But even more profound issues are posed by this case. All students of inter-racial problems recognize that most race conflicts are rooted in economic competition. That is why such conflicts are sharpened during a depression—witness the "Zulu" and other outrages of the early thirties—and are eased when jobs become plentiful as at present. Vice-President Wallace has pointed out recently that it will not be enough to police the post-war world; we must also free it from want and enforced idleness. For in an economy of

abundance—perhaps only in such an economy—our race problems like most of our other social problems become relatively easy of solution.

The New Negro

Discrimination against Negroes in industry, color bars in union constitutions and rituals, a Jim Crow army and navy—all these things are strictly in the pattern of Hitlerian racism which we are fighting. Contemporary liberals, progressive laborites and churchmen cannot evade or compromise this issue any more than the Abolitionists could compromise the issue of chattel slavery. They will be well advised, incidentally, to realize that in any case the Negroes themselves will not compromise it.

All sections of Negro opinion are united in the demand for full economic and social, as well as political, equality. This, as A. Philip Randolph has recently pointed out, is not something to be alarmed about. On the contrary it is a basically healthy manifestation, which, given the support of informed white liberals both north and south, will do much to ease tensions and facilitate the transition to a new and far sounder phase of race relationships in this country. As A. Philip Randolph wrote in a recent letter:

“How can the Negro be expected to participate morally and spiritually in this People’s War unless at the same time he is permitted—even encouraged—to fight whole-heartedly for participation at home in the common rights of our common American heritage which have been so long denied him? Indeed, how can we Negroes expect you whites to respect us until you see that we have discarded the last vestige of the slave’s embittered subservience, the last corrosive dregs

of psychological inferiority and belligerency? . . . Until, in short, you see a new Negro standing erect in the living room of his own soul. . . ."

Will the war and the People's Peace—when, as and if—open a new day for this New Negro whom Randolph proclaims?

The issue is far from settled. All one can say is that the status quo is broken and cannot be restored: not in industry, nor in education, not even in the army and navy where the concessions to pressure have been least significant. We must go either backward or forward. If we are to escape being overwhelmed by a wave of reaction more devastating than that which followed World War I it had better be forward—and fast.

This pamphlet has emphasized the progress made in opening up war industries to Negro workers. But it would be unrealistic not to recognize that only a bare beginning has been made thus far. According to a recent survey by the War Manpower Commission, 51 per cent of the expected job openings in 1943 were still barred to Negroes, although a million Negro men and women were still unemployed.

In the field of education the balance sheet is also still unfavorable. True, more than 4,800 Negroes received college degrees in 1941, and more than 56,000 completed trades, industrial, professional and clerical courses. By the end of 1942 an additional 56,000 were enrolled in rapidly expanding defense training courses. But a month after Pearl Harbor only 194 of the 4,630 training courses accepted Negroes—this although the Bill that providing \$60,000 to finance these courses forbade discrimination! There has been some improvement in this situation, but little or none in the

long-standing disparity between the educational facilities available to Negroes and to whites in the south. There many Negro schools are open only three or four months in the year, and taught by teachers paid \$25 or \$30 a month. In 1936 a survey of ten southern states showed annual per-pupil expenditures of \$17.04 for Negro children, as against \$49.30 for white children.

Lincoln said the help of the Negroes, following the Emancipation Proclamation, was decisive in saving the nation. Quite possibly some future historian may write that the failure of this Administration to end discrimination and Jim Crowism in the armed forces was decisive in losing us, not the war, but the peace. It was a white man in uniform who said, the day after the American landing in North Africa: "What wouldn't a non-Jim Crow division be worth to us now!" Naturally, he didn't speak for the record, or for the ruling army hierarchy. The pattern of race relations in the army is still set by Colonel Jim Crow—a stupider and more obsolescent person, if possible, than the celebrated Colonel Blimp. Concessions thus far have been limited to the establishment of a few officer training courses which admit Negroes. There are only 650 colored officers in the entire Army. There has also been some, but not enough improvement in the protection given to Negro soldiers in southern towns. In the Navy, the door has been opened to a limited number of Negro reservists. But Negroes are still excluded from Annapolis, whereas they are accepted at West Point.

In the field of social relations an important test will come next Spring when A. Philip Randolph will urge, at the May conference of the March-on-Washington Movement, a broad national program of non-violent civil disobedience and non-co-operation aimed at abolishing Jim Crowism in restaurants,

public conveyances, waiting rooms—wherever it manifests itself. Unquestionably, the Negro is moving out of his second-class status in all departments of life. Has white liberalism enough vitality to meet him half way? Is there sufficient imagination, tolerance, and statesmanship on the both sides to accomplish the transition sanely and without violence? The future will show.

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